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HEADLINE: North Korea Floats a Revolutionary Ideology: Realism

BYLINE: By SELIG S. HARRISON; Selig S. Harrison is a senior associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and a former foreign correspondent. His visit to North Korea, from Sept. 23 to Oct. 2, which is something rarely permitted to American journalists, was made under the auspices of the Carnegie Endowment.

DATELINE: PYONGYANG, North Korea

BODY:

NORTH KOREA has lost faith in its ability to reunify Korea under Communist rule and is prepared to negotiate peace with South Korea and the United States following next month's presidential election in the South. This was my conclusion after 10 days of conversations in Pyongyang last month with a variety of North Korean leaders, including Prime Minister Li Gun Mo, Foreign Minister Kim Yong Nam and Hwang Chang Yop, the powerful secretary of the Workers (Communist) Party Central Committee responsible for foreign policy. Economic pressures appear to be compelling North Korea to pursue two closely related priorities: a reduction of military spending through an accommodation with Seoul and Washington, and a rapid influx of advanced industrial technology, facilitated by a China-style economic opening to the West.

Underlying both of these policy departures is a new note of realism in the North's perceptions of the South. Officials no longer discount the South's economic growth, as they did during an earlier visit in 1972, nor do they equate opposition to military rule in Seoul with potential political support for the North.

Asked whether the upsurge in opposition strength in South Korea this year foreshadowed a shift to the left and an eventual Communist revolution, Hwang Chang Yop replied: "Such a thing is quite impossible, completely out of the question. Nearly 40 years have passed since the Korean War, and we recognize that many changes have occurred in South Korea. The opposition parties are not geared to changing the social and economic system in the South. If they are successful, it would not be a revolution, unless you would regard a democratic regime less beholden to the United States as a revolution."

The economic arithmetic of the Korean arms race may explain why the North wants to reduce its defense expenditures: the South, with a population of 42 million and an American military presence, devotes only 7 percent of its gross national product to defense, and pursues ever higher consumption levels, while the North, with 20 million people and no foreign troops, spends 24 percent of its gross national product on defense at the expense of consumer goods production and other economic development needs.

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Seoul points to North Korea's defense spending level as evidence that Kim Il Sung still intends to reunify the peninsula by force. But North Korea insists that it is ready to cut its armed forces down to 100,000 if Seoul would join in a mutual forces reduction agreement linked to a parallel withdrawal of American conventional and nuclear forces.

In a recent proposal to South Korea and the United States for negotiations to be held next March, after the election, the North suggested that force reductions be completed within five years. Foreign Minister Kim said that the deadline is negotiable, and did not rule out 10 years, with American air and naval forces remaining longer than ground forces. Similarly, on verification and other key particulars, I found Pyongyang officials ready to compromise and to discuss details of how the agreement could operate. Prime Minister Li Gun Mo said that an arms reduction agreement "would relieve many of our economic problems by releasing manpower and funds needed for our civilian economy," adding that the Government wants to promote "a great upsurge" of consumer goods during the first four years of the new seven-year economic plan, but that "how much we can shift to light industries depends largely on how much we can reduce our defense burden."

I found it much easier to have productive give-and-take with North Korean officials than 15 years ago. No subject was taboo, though there were flashes of anger and little enlightenment when I mentioned the health of 75-year-old Kim Il Sung, Kim Jong Il's ability to govern and the 1983 Rangoon bombing that killed 16 South Korean officials. On most issues, I found a readiness to go far beyond published positions and to respond directly to sharp challenges that would previously have produced a flood of predictable rhetoric.

'Very Flexible'

For example, in its formal stand on the unification of Korea, Pyongyang advocates a federation. Autonomous regimes with differing systems would remain intact in North and South, but a "federal" government would have a combined army and a standing committee that would "supervise" the two "regional" governments. This would be a transitional step on the road to full unification, with "the people" deciding when, whether and how to change the structure. Not surprisingly, Seoul has dismissed this idea, arguing that Pyongyang would simply use interchange under such a system to promote subversion in the South. When I repeatedly criticized the North's proposal as unrealistic, Hwang Chang Yop and several other high Central Committee officials retreated from their prepared remarks. "You will find us very flexible," said Mr. Hwang, "if we are all going in the same direction, toward confederation, rather than toward legitimizing two Koreas." Pyongyang is ready to discuss "any other idea consistent with movement toward confederation, however gradual."

In the North's evolving concept, Mr. Hwang explained, federation is no longer a transitional stage but the "final stage" of unification, and there is no longer any provision for integrating the two differing social and economic systems. In principle, a combined army would be an ultimate goal, but "if we can improve relations between the two Koreas, then having two armies would be acceptable, especially if their size can be reduced." Mr. Hwang strongly implied that Pyongyang is prepared to go along with a creeping process of "cross-recognition" of the two Korean regimes by the major powers in the context of parallel movement toward a limited confederation.

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"Cross-recognition" (American, Soviet and Chinese recognition of both North and South) is the stated goal of American policy. It has been rejected by the North. But Mr. Hwang hinted at a compromise when asked whether he would like to see formal American diplomatic relations with Pyongyang or would prefer, instead, to have the United States wait until it could have relations with a confederal republic. He replied that a liaison office would be appropriate after the signing of a peace treaty, and that full relations "might well" be possible when and if the United States agreed to a withdrawal of its forces and "expressed a favorable attitude toward confederation, even if it is not actually achieved."

Asked about the future of Pyongyang's security links with Moscow and Beijing, Foreign Minister Kim said that "there is nothing immutable in our undertakings, just as we hope that there is nothing immutable in the present form of your relations with the South." "We intend to strengthen and develop our relations with the United States in the days ahead," he said. "We want balanced relations with the major powers. This is in our interest, and yours." "Once we fought a war," he added, "but we cannot continuously maintain an abnormal relationship. The past is past."

GRAPHIC: Photo of North Korean soldiers on guard at Panmunjom in the zone between North and South Korea (Black Star Anthony Suau)

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